DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 386 050 FL 023 214

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TITLE Writing from Sources: Does Source Material Help or Hinder Students' Performance?
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 16p.; In: Bird, Norman, Ed., And Others. Language and Learning. Papers presented at the Annual International Language in Education Conference (Hong Kong, 1993); see FL 023 205.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; College Students; Comparative Analysis; Educational Strategies; English (Second Language); *English for Academic Purposes; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Information Sources; Instructional Effectiveness; *Research Methodology; *Resource Materials; Second Language Instruction; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Strategies
IDENTIFIERS *Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

This paper reports a study that compared the writing of non-native speaking students provided with background reading texts for their own academic writing with students who had not been given the texts. Essay quality was compared in terms of length, the number and extent of elaboration of the points presented, and the writer's overall success/failure to substantiate a point of view. For the group given texts, the way the information was used and the extent of attribution to authors were also studied. Subjects were 75 Hong Kong university students in a compulsory academic English course. Results showed that the background texts provide students with ideas but did not necessarily improve writing quality. Students given texts relied heavily on them and less on their own ideas, and did not develop propositions fully. Students without background texts tended to support their ideas more extensively, even if they had fewer ideas to contribute. What appeared to distinguish more successful writers among those with texts was their ability to summarize main ideas and passages and integrate them into their own writing. It is concluded that provision of background texts does not necessarily enhance student writing skills, but may help students cope with academic writing tasks. Contains 19 references. (MSE)

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WRITING FROM SOURCES: DOES SOURCE MATERIAL HELP OR HINDER STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE?

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WRITING FROM SOURCES: DOES SOURCE MATERIAL HELP OR HINDER STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE?

Jo Lewkowicz

Introduction

There appear to be two basic reasons why the task of writing from sources is included in proficiency tests such as IELTS, TEEP and OTESL which are designed to assess students' ability to cope with language for academic study. First, it is argued that providing students with texts on which to base their writing ensures that they have something to say and that no student is disadvantaged through lack of information. As Weir (1993:135) has pointed out:

> By basing writing tasks on written and/or spoken text supplied to candidates or on non-verbal stimuli, it is possible to ensure that in terms of subject knowledge all start equally, at least in terms of the information available to them.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, such writing purportedly replicates the writing students are expected to undertake in their academic studies outside the language classroom. As Weir (1983:378) found in determining the tasks to be included in the TEEP test

> ... the task most students have to cope with across a range of disciplines would be the selective extraction of relevant information from a written corpus of information and verbal input and the subsequent reformulation of data from either or both sources in a piece of extended writing.

Thus, as Read (1990:113) has noted, providing test-takers with content material on which to base their writing

> may help reduce the effects of differences in background knowledge among test-takers and, when the writing tasks are linked with earlier reading and listening tasks, may represent a better simulation of the process of academic study than simply giving a stand-alone writing test.

But the effect of providing students with source material on which to base their writing has not been fully investigated. It is conceivable that such source text(s) impede rather than enhance performance and that students would write better without them. Their appropriate use depends on students' understanding the texts provided and this, in turn, may depend on their background knowledge of the subject under consideration. It is possible that students lacking sufficient depth of

knowledge have to rely heavily on the background texts and that they may inadvertently be 'encouraged' to replicate not only the content but also the lexis and structure of the original texts.

Writing from sources, nevertheless, is an authentic task in that it is required of many tertiary students across a wide range of disciplines (Weir 1983, Horowitz 1986). It involves skills which students need to master if they are to be accepted into an academic community. It is therefore a valid test-task both in terms of face and content validity. Yet it is a task which many students, particularly those whose L1 is not English, appear to find difficult. It is a task that needs to be more accurately described and fully understood if it is to be valid not only in terms of face and content validity but also in terms of construct and predictive validity.

There has been considerable interest in the reading-writing relationship (see, for example, Esterhold 1990, and for a comprehensive review, Tierney & Shanahan 1989). There has also been much research into the writing process both in the L1 (see among others, Britton et al. 1975, Graves 1983), and the L2 (including studies by Zamel 1983, Raimes 1987 and Cummings 1989). But little is know about how successful writers integrate sources into their own writing or the difficulties that non-native speakers encounter in dealing with such tasks. Those studies which have dealt with the synthesis of information from sources have focused either on writing a summary from a single source (e.g. Taylor 1984) or on the effect of reading ability on writing (e.g. Kennedy 1985). They have failed to look at how the information from a text is used in the students' own writing.

One notable exception to this is the study by Campbell (1990) who compared the way in which native and non-native speaker students used a background reading text to write an academic essay. She found that although both groups have shown an ability to use the source text appropriately, that is to quote from it, paraphrase, summarise and explain it in their own writing, they still relied heavily on copying, not only in the appropriate form of quoting from the text, but also in the inappropriate forms of exact or near copies from it. She also found that both groups frequently failed to reference the text and used it more frequently to foreground information, that is, to make a point rather than to support their own content.

A serious limitation of this study was that the students' writing was based on a single background text. In academia, students are generally expected to assimilate information from a number of sources, some of which may present conflicting points of view. According to Campbell, using a single source may have contributed to the students' failure to attribute since they were aware of the fact that their instructors were familiar with the text.

> If these same students were given another writing task involving the use of a number of sources presenting conflicting views, they might have provided more documentation to clarify the sources of the various views. (Campbell 1990:223)

Furthermore, although it is common to assign essays based on background reading, in contrast to the instructions given by Campbell, instructions to students do not usually specify the source(s) on which the answer is to be based. Providing such specific instructions may have contributed not only to the lack of attribution, but also to the extent and location of the text references in the students' essays.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to compare, given the same task, the writing of non-native speaker students provided with background reading texts for their own academic writing with that of students who had not been given the texts. The quality of the essays was compared in terms of length, the number and extent of elaboration of the points presented, as well as the overall success (or failure) of the writers to substantiate a point of view. In addition, for the group who were given the texts, the way in which the information was used and the extent of attribution to authors of the background texts were also recorded.

Subjects

The 75 non-native speaker subjects for this study were enroled in the English for Arts Students (EAS) course at the University of Hong Kong. This is a compulsory EAP course for all first year students in the Faculty of Arts at the University. The students were from six of the forty groups being taught, the students being randomly selected into groups at the beginning of the academic year. In terms of *Use of English*, which is a public examination held at the end of S7 (Grade 13), all students entering the Faculty have attained a minimum grade 'D8' (maximum 'A1'), with a small number of mature students being granted an exemption from the examination.

Materials and Method

Three of the groups participating in the study were selected to do the task with the texts (Group 1) and three without the texts (Group 2). The mean scores for the students' *Use of English* examination were compared across the two groups to confirm that there was no difference in language proficiency between those being assigned the task with the texts and those being assigned the task without the text (Table 1).

For the three subgroups with the texts (Group 1), instructors were asked to give these out to students 25 minutes before the end of a class. The students were informed that they would be using the texts on a subsequent occasion, though they were not given details of the writing task at this stage. The students had time to read the texts, make notes on the side and generally think about the subject. The texts the students had worked on were then collected in and the same texts with the

student's notes were returned to individual students at the beginning of the following class (no later than 2 days after the first class). These students were then given the same essay question as those in the three subgroups (Group 2) who were selected to complete the task without the texts. There were in total 32 students working with the texts and 43 without the texts. All the students were given a full class (50 minutes) to write the essay.

Table 1

Differences in mean UE scores for the two groups

	mean	**s.d.**
Group 1 (n = 29)	6.276	1.386
Group 2 (n = 40)	6.125	1.771
		t=.38, p=.704 (n.s.)

Note: n = 69 : UE for 6 students not available

The students working with the texts were given two extracts on Hong Kong identity, one from an article (Baker 1983) and another from a book (Yee 1989). The extracts, which were of approximately the same length, i.e. the former of 745 words and the latter of 805 words, were selected because of their relevance to the essay topic and because they had been piloted with previous groups of students at the University. They also presented similar information but from a different perspective, not always coming to the same conclusions.

With 1997 approaching and the impending return of Hong Kong to China, students in Hong Kong are concerned about the issue of preserving their own identity. Hence it was believed that they would be able to write something within the allocated time on the subject even without the texts. However, it was hoped that the texts would complement what the students had to say and would enable them to support their ideas. The full essay topic was as follows:

> To what extent do you believe that Hong Kong people have a unique culture and identity of their own? Give evidence to support your views. You may wish to consider some or all of the following points.
>
> - Historical ties with China
> - Family life

- Life-style
- Interests/pastimes
- Work styles and habits

The prompts, which cover the main areas discussed in the texts, were given so as not to disadvantage the students without the texts. There is also evidence that such questions are set outside the language classroom and not only at the University. (See, for example, Horowitz 1986, for tasks set by subject professors in the U.S.)

The essays were marked holistically by a class instructor on a scale of 1 to 10. The researcher then double-marked all the student scripts. (In a follow-up study, the same scripts will be analytically marked to determine whether any specific differences in writing quality across the two groups can be discerned.)

Once the essays had been typed out for ease of reference, they were analyzed in terms of the number of points introduced by each of the writers. First the points were counted for the two texts, text 1 introducing 22 different points and text 2 introducing 11. (These points can in effect be regarded as linguistic propositions in that they are assertions that contain truth value, though many of them in text 1, for instance, were listed rather than developed, explained or elaborated.) For Group 1 students each of the points put forward were matched against those identified in the texts. Then any additional points introduced by the students were recorded. For Group 2, the total number of points supporting the students' arguments was noted.

Finally, one of the subgroups of students (11 students in total) who did the task with the texts was interviewed to better understand how they perceived the task and why they used the texts as they did.

Analysis of Data

The mean scores awarded by the instructors and the researcher for the two groups of students were compared to see whether either of the groups performed significantly better than the other. In addition, the mean lengths of the essays in terms of the number of words were compared across the two groups as it was hypothesized that students with the texts would have more to say about the culture and identity of Hong Kong people than those without the texts. Finally, the mean number of points introduced by each group were compared to verify whether the background texts did provide Group 1 students with additional information to use in their writing.

For the group with the texts, the mean ratio of points generated from each of the texts was calculated to see whether both texts had been used equally. The mean ratio of points from the texts to student-generated points was also estimated. Then the points which students had used from the sources were examined to see whether

they had been used as background or foreground information, and whether they had been acceptably attributed to the relevant author.

Results and Discussion

The interrater reliability of .61, though significant at $p < .001$, was not high. However, the difference in mean scores for the essays across the two groups of students showed no significant difference at the .05 level (Table 2).

Table 2

Differences in mean task scores for the instructors and the researcher for the two groups

	Instructors		**Researcher**	
	mean (max 10)	**s.d.**	**x (max 10)**	**s.d.**
Group 1 (background texts + essay) (n = 32)	6.219	1.845	6.219	1.641
Group 2 (essay only) (n = 43)	6.395	1.904	6.302	1.897
	t = .40, p = .688 (n.s.)		t = .20, p = .842 (n.s.)	

Thus, though there was considerable variability in how the raters assessed individual essays, neither the instructors nor the researcher appear to have perceived a difference in standard of writing between the two groups. The group without the texts seems to have been equally as successful in fulfilling the task as the group with the texts.

This finding is further supported by the fact that though there was some difference between the mean length of the essays across the two groups, this difference was not significant at the .05 level (Table 3).

Table 3

Differences in mean length of essays for the two groups

	No. of words	
	mean	**s.d.**
Group 1 (background texts + essay) (n = 32)	435.188	122.146
Group 2 (essay only) (n = 43)	397.372	100.841
	t = 1.47, p = .147 (n.s.)	

Since one of the reasons for providing students with texts is to ensure they have something to say, it was assumed that Group 1's essays would have been more detailed. This, however, appears not to have been the case. Not only was there no significant difference between the mean lengths of the essays, but the range for the two groups was also very similar. Group 1 students wrote between 221-731 words while Group 2 between 196-694 words. It must, however, be remembered that the amount students wrote may have been limited by the time restriction. Students in Group 1 may have written more if they had been given more time, a fact confirmed by some of the interviewed students. In the same way, students in Group 2 may have written more if they had had more time to think about the subject: they were not given the same opportunity as Group 1 to consider the subject in advance.

The one difference between the two groups that was significant at $p < .05$ was the mean number of points students introduced to support their argument (Table 4).

This suggests that the texts helped students to generate additional ideas, the ratio of ideas found in the texts to student generated ideas not found in the texts being approximately 4:1. But since there was no significant difference in the mean length of the essays, Group 2 students without the texts appear to have developed their ideas more fully. In itself this can be seen as a positive rather than negative trait, a point made by Falvey (forthcoming) who, in discussing the attributes of a good essay, noted:

> In an essay, the force of a proposition and the effect of it on a reader is strengthened if the proposition contains supporting arguments, or if it is elaborated or explained further.

Table 4

Differences in mean number of points introduced for the two groups

	mean	s.d.
Group 1 (background texts + essay) (n = 32)	10.625	3.722
Group 2 (essay only) (n = 43)	8.605	3.375
		t = 2.45, p = .017*

*significant at p<.05 level

Although there was some overlap in the ideas presented in the two texts, the ratio of ideas between text 1 and text 2 was 2:1. If the students in Group 1 had used the texts equally, one would have expected the same ratio of points to be taken from each text. In reality that proved not to be the case; the ratio of points used from text 1 and text 2 was approximately 9:2. This would imply that text 1 was easier for the students, but using the Fog index (Gunning 1952) it was found to be the more difficult passage. With a Fog index of 17, text 1 could, in fact, be considered too difficult for undergraduate students, while text 2 with a Fog index of 15 at about the right level. An alternative explanation, and one confirmed by the students when interviewed, was that text 1 lent itself more readily to the direct lifting of ideas from the text. According to some of the students, Baker 1983 (text 1) was easier to copy while Yee 1989 (text 2) was more difficult as the relevant ideas in the latter were scattered and the text included a number of points that were not related to the question.

The extent of exact and near copying among the students in Group 1 appears on first analysis to be extensive (though more detailed analysis remains to be undertaken in a subsequent study). All 32 students used ideas from one or both passages, yet only 6 made any attempt to attribute and of these only 1 attributed and gave the references at the end of the essay. Campbell (1990) in her study justified the lack of attribution by the fact that her students were given only one text and they knew their instructors were familiar with it. In this study, the fact that the students were given two texts appears to have made little difference. Even

though the students had been taught to attribute in their EAP classes, few demonstrated an ability to do so, and even fewer an ability to do so correctly. Examples of attribution from the students' writing include the following:

> As in Yee, A.H.'s passage, the pursuit of material interests could be a show of family ties ... (Student W101/1/10)

> As Mr Baker said in his book, the emergence of Hong Kong man, China Quarterly, the common theme of Hong Kong life is "Drink your wine today and be drunk". That means Hong Kong people are ... (Student W108/5/23)

> For most of these people, Hong Kong is only a temporary place of residence and work. (Baker 1983). "It was a business location to be exploited and then to be retired from in later life, ...". (Student W101/9/18)

In the few essays where the attribution was correct it was not always consistent. For example, in essay (W101/4/13) ideas taken from text 1 made up approximately one-third of the essay, yet the writer only made reference, albeit correctly, to Baker twice.

Campbell (ibid.:221) in her study also suggested that there was no evidence that students intentionally or through lack of knowledge violated the accepted conventions of attribution. According to her they may have failed to reference simply because of time pressures.

> Given time constraints and the physical constraints of a full classroom, most writers find it difficult to produce quality writing. To include information from written sources without violating conventions of acceptability is even more difficult. The possibility exists that some of these students might have even intended to eliminate Near Copies in later revisions of their papers.

In the writing of Hong Kong students there is little evidence that they would 'eliminate Near Copies' (i.e. parts of their writing which closely adhered to the wording of source texts.) Teachers of EAP and subject-specialists have long complained that students are not averse to plagiarism and the interviewed students themselves said it was easier to copy as in that way they could avoid mistakes. They did not see anything wrong in this as they claimed they were copying from authorities who would inevitably be better than themselves. This is supported by a study by Deckert (1993), who found that Hong Kong Chinese tertiary students, brought up in a tradition of rote memorisation and an adherence to a limited number of 'authorities', appear to have a very different attitude to plagiarism than their Western counterparts. Whereas

> American freshman registered concern for authors, fellow students, ownership rights, and responsibility for doing independent work, the first

year Hong Kong students seemed to approach only the latter concern and then only with a pronounced egocentric emphasis. That is, they viewed plagiarism to be wrong because it hampers their own learning and disturbs their sense of personal integrity. The other issues seemed to be of little consequence. (Deckert 1993:141-142)

A careful examination of the way in which students used the ideas from the texts further demonstrates their tendency to produce these ideas as their own. It also indicates, as can be seen from the examples below, their inclination to select key words from the texts and, often out of context, string them together without any development or explanation, making their points at times difficult to follow. (The italics in the examples indicates the parts taken from the texts; the errors are those made by the students.)

Example 1

Besides, *the major religion of settled China has been ancestor worship, which is associated with continuity of family and land ownership, but the religions of Hong Kong Chinese are those which stress movement and expediency.* So you can find that *there are a large number of Christians in Hong Kong,* but on the other hand *many people go to temples whose gods have the reputation of bringing fortune and happiness, and when the prayers are not answered they move on to another god or temple.*

Many foreigners said the work styles of Hong Kong people are distinctive, they are *highly competitive, tough for survival, quick thinking and flexible.*

Hong Kong people like to wear *western clothes, speaks English or expects his children to do so, drinks western alcohol* ... etc. They are not westerners, but *almost alone in the Chinese world Hong Kong has not adopted Mandarin as the lingua franca,* it is really unique. (Student W108/14/32)

[Note the order of points follows that in text 1, but the writer has been selective in the points chosen. Integration of the text with the student's own writing fails in the latter part. The section quoted makes up approximately one-quarter of the essay.]

Example 2

In addition, HK people prefer western life style to Chinese one. HK people like wearing *western clothes, speak English and expect exciting* as well as new life-style.

Furthermore, HK people develop a unique work styles and habits. *Quick thinking, flexible* and *competitive* attitude is the main working feature. *Fast*

working *pace* was adopted in life-style. Also, Hong Kong people pursue immediate return and satisfactions making people seem to be more *materialistic*. (Student W136/4/4)

[Note that the writer in this short section uses a variety of key words from the second and third paragraphs of text 1 and makes minor changes such as 'quick satisfaction' to 'immediate return and satisfactions'. In addition, the writer's failure to develop ideas, for example in the first paragraph, makes some of the points difficult to follow. What does he mean by '... speak English and expect exciting as well as new life-style'?]

Example 3

Deep westernization is another aspect of Hong Kong culture. Hong Kong people are *go-getting, highly competitive, tough for survival, wear western clothes, speak English, drink alcohol, have sophisticated tastes in cars, and household gadgetry. But they are not westerner, they are merely westernized.* Meanwhile *they are not Chinese in the sense that the citizens of the People's Republic of China are Chinese.* They are not westerner but westernized, not the citizens of China but Chinese. It is their identity. (Student W101/5/14)

[Note how the writer uses the plural rather than the singular of the original text, but otherwise copies from text 1. This section makes up approximately one-third of the total essay.]

A further characteristic of the students' writing also emerges from the essays. Some of the students who were able to summarise the main points of the texts were also able to use such information as background in support of what they were saying, as in the example below:

Example 4

Besides, the working attitude of Hong Kong people, their pastimes and interests are also similar. Today, Hong Kong's economy has been greatly improved and hence, Hong Kong people can and are willing to spend money in luxuries and high-class services. It is doubtful whether any other country or city will have so many luxury advertisements broadcast every day, from diamond watches to first-class cars. (Student W136/3/3)

[Note that the student's main proposition is Hong Kong peoples' interest in money and how she uses the idea of Hong Kong people having 'sophisticated tastes' as an example of that interest. She is using

information from the text to support her own ideas, i.e. as background rather than as foreground information.]

However, in line with Campbell's (1990) findings, the majority of students appear to have used the texts as sources of foreground information, to introduce new propositions rather than to support their own ideas (see examples 1-3 above). The reason for such foregrounding may lie partially in the texts themselves. Both were short and packed with information that was not extensively developed. As one of the interviewed students pointed out, if the points needed explanation, the authors of the texts would have given the necessary detail.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether giving students texts upon which to base their writing enhances their performance and if so, in what way(s).

The initial results reported here indicate that background texts provide student writers with ideas, but they do not necessarily improve the quality of their writing. Given texts, students appear to rely heavily on these and less so on their own ideas. They do not develop their propositions fully which may make their writing difficult to follow. In contrast, students' writing without access to background texts support their ideas more extensively, even though they may have fewer ideas to contribute.

What seems to distinguish the more successful writers among those with the texts is their ability to summarise the main ideas in the passages and then integrate them in their own writing. This seems to be closely related to the skill of backgrounding information-a skill which many first-year undergraduates in Hong Kong find difficult. It may be that this skill needs to be explicitly taught (and tested) if students are to be weaned away from foregrounding source-text information in their own writing.

Dependence on background texts appears to lead to the breaking of academic conventions as well as the foregrounding of text information. It may hamper students' writing rather than enhance it. Thus, the argument that students' writing without text support are disadvantaged remains questionable. The main justification for maintaining text-based writing tasks within EAP courses and tests remains that such tasks replicate those students have to cope with in their studies: they are a stepping-stone to being able to cope with academic writing. Yet, since students probably have to deal with various forms of non-text based writing outside the university setting, it may be that such non-text based writing should also be encouraged and tested.

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